

STAT

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
2 February 1976

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The President and the Chiefs

"There will be an agreement unless the President suddenly decides it is not in his political interest," a former principal in U.S. planning for strategic arms negotiations tells us, "These are the considerations that move the process." He expresses relief that he is no longer in office, "imagine the screws being turned right now."

History suggests that it's possible to carry cynicism about democratic leaders too far, but obviously the SALT debate described nearby is shaded by political calculations. For that matter, even the most disinterested calculation of the long-term national interest would have to include assessments that are political in the highest sense of the word—what the people want and how far they might reasonably be led. These considerations, not merely those of one negotiation, now lie before President Ford.

Ultimately the President's decision is whether in a democratic political system there is any real alternative to the increasingly soggy detente masterminded by Secretary of State Kissinger. The question is most sharply posed by the strategic arms negotiations, especially since Mr. Kissinger frequently makes the argument—most recently reported in James Reston's column yesterday—that in any event Congress will not fund programs necessary to keep up with Soviet arms developments, so we had better take the deal we can get. Like detente, this argument grows soggy. For the President has never taken his case to the people, asking them to change the Congress.

If the President made such a request over military preparedness, would the people respond—if not enough to change the members of Congress at least enough to change their attitudes? This is a political question not only in the base sense but in the high sense. Answering it is a responsibility President Ford must face as the crucial SALT decisions are made this week and next.

Equally important, the Joint Chiefs of Staff must face their responsibility, for they play a crucial role in the political calculations. As long as the President can rely on the Chiefs to say a treaty is acceptable, he is practically invulnerable to political attack from that side of the issue, all the talk of a Reagan threat notwithstanding. If the President decides hard, he must take the heat himself. If he decides soft, he can keep the Chiefs in line; he can transfer to them responsibility for

With "the screws being turned," the choice for the Chiefs and other top bureaucrats may be to get in line or to resign. Those who know them well do not think the current Chiefs are the resigning type, but rather, tend to reflect a demoralized military and to have ambitions for reappointment or advancement controlled by the President. But military men are trained to face duty, and the Chiefs also have a statutory responsibility to advise not only the President but also Congress.

The Chiefs can do their duty by sticking to their last. They should write advice and offer testimony on the explicit basis that they are competent to judge only military considerations, that it is for others to balance the military disadvantages of SALT against the political advantages of detente. By describing the military factors candidly, they can transfer responsibility back where it belongs.

The narrow issue to watch is the range of the Soviet Backfire bomber. If there is a strategic agreement excluding the Backfire, Congress will ask the Chiefs what happened in the weeks after January 13, when they insisted the bomber had intercontinental capability. To justify any such agreement, the screws would be turned to obtain a new estimate of the Backfire's range, more in line with Soviet professions. With the President's closest political associates running both the Pentagon and the CIA, such a re-estimate is far from inconceivable. It will be the first test of the political independence proclaimed by CIA Director George Bush.

The larger test, though, falls on President Ford. How much mileage, diplomatic or political, remains in detente as we have come to know it? What is the meaning of the clinking of champagne glasses at a new summit while the Soviets take over Angola and win the best of a new SALT bargain? Is everything military, so unpopular with the American people the U.S. has no alternative to a slow world-wide decline?

Or if asked, would the people respond? Could a presidential campaign be based on the necessity to bolster defense, preparing for more even-handed arms negotiations and a more even-handed detente in the future? Could the President win votes by saying America needs to stand up in the world?

The most politically popular figure in the current administration is not Gerald Ford or Henry Kissinger. It is Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Sure the people would respond; what is lacking is someone to ask them. If President Ford is ever to do so, the time is now. Soviet greediness in the last round of SALT provides him the ideal vehicle.